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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 001831

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S INTRODUCTORY CALL ON THE CHAIRMAN OF
THE AZERBAIJANI STATE RELIGIOUS COMMITTEE

REF: BAKU 1132

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) Summary: In a November 7 introductory meeting, the Chairman of the State Committee on Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA) Hidayet Orujov told the Ambassador that the GOAJ was committed both to ensuring religious freedom and to preserving Azerbaijan's history of interfaith harmony. Orujov said that Azerbaijan did not receive enough international attention given its unique role as a secular, tolerant, Muslim country. He added that radical Muslim groups, deriving their origins from abroad, posed a threat over the longer term to Azerbaijan's secularism but that society would not allow extremism to take hold. He also said that his predecessor, Rafiq Aliyev, had failed to promote Azerbaijan's success in this field which, he believed, explained USG concerns in the 2006 IRF. Orujov added that under his leadership the SCWRA would reach out to the international community and stressed that he did not believe the SCWRA's role was to interfere in matters of individual faith. The Ambassador underscored that the USG strongly supported religious freedom as a human right and urged Orujov to distinguish between legitimate expressions of religiosity and any radicalized groups which might constitute a security threat. The Ambassador also urged Orujov to advance the dialogue between the West and Muslim world through Azerbaijan's role as the current OIC ministerial chairman. End Summary.

ORUJOV: WE MUST PROVIDE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, BUT PRESERVE
TOLERANCE, SECULARISM

12. (C) In a November 7 introductory meeting the Chairman of the State Committee on Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA), Hidayet Orujov, told the Ambassador that he viewed the SCWRA's role as allowing people to exercise their lawful right to worship freely. Orujov said that Azerbaijan had a unique and positive historical experience to draw on which encouraged tolerance and provided for interfaith harmony. Orujov commented that in his view Azerbaijan's unique history of religious tolerance did not receive adequate international attention and that he hoped to change this during his tenure as chairman. (President Aliyev appointed Orujov, a former counselor at the Apparat, to the SCWRA chairmanship in July 2006 following the dismissal of Orujov's outspoken predecessor, Rafiq Aliyev.)

13. (C) Orujov warned the Ambassador that the Committee viewed some nontraditional faiths as radical and dangerous to Azerbaijan's secularism and interfaith tolerance. He singled out Wahabbist Muslims, (the Turkish-origin) Nurcular movement and conservative Shiite groups, telling the Ambassador these groups are often financed from abroad by those seeking to export radical Islamic "tendencies" to Azerbaijan. The

groups' ultimate goal, he argued, is to undermine Azerbaijan's secularism and its long tradition of interfaith harmony. He added that while he did not believe that there was a foundation for radicalized Islam to take hold in Azerbaijan, the State Committee's responsibility was to do its best to preserve society's tradition of secularism and tolerance.

14. (C) Orujov further commented that, if left unchecked, these radical "tendencies" would pose a danger to Azerbaijani society over the next 10 to 20 years but he hastened to add that the GOAJ will "never allow this to happen." Orujov opined that he did not believe the SCWRA role was to interfere in matters of faith but extremism in any society was a disease and that even in a secular society like Azerbaijan "there are limits to society's tolerance." Orujov urged the Ambassador to work with the State Committee to redouble its efforts to educate young people on the role of faith and religion in the secular context.

15. (C) Turning to other non-traditional denominations, Orujov said that public interest in non-traditional Christian faiths was also increasing but that the GOAJ did not interfere in their affairs because people have a right to worship as they choose. He noted, for example, that the Roman Catholic Church was building a new facility in Baku. However, he said that some of the non-traditional Christian religions, without identifying which, were illegally paying people to encourage their participation in the church. Orujov added that some of these newer religious groups are also less tolerant of interfaith harmony. He raised the concern that this might contribute to clashes among Azerbaijan's various religious communities. Orujov stressed that Azerbaijan's history of interfaith tolerance was superior to any other country in the

BAKU 00001831 002 OF 002

region, telling the Ambassador that while the Turkish Government seeks to control all aspects of religious life in Turkey, the GOAJ State Committee leaves matters of faith, such as the selection of imams, to the Caucasus Muslim Board and its leader Sheikh Pashazade.

16. (C) The Ambassador told Orujov that the USG appreciated Azerbaijan's potential as a moderating force in the Islamic world and agreed that Azerbaijan has not received the international attention it deserved as a model of religious tolerance. However, the Ambassador said that to realize its potential, the GOAJ must actively protect the right of the public to worship freely and draw a clear distinction between the natural rise in public interest in religion - a consequence of Azerbaijan's post-Soviet independence - and the threat posed by terrorists who act under the false pretense of religiosity.

17. (C) The Ambassador affirmed that the U.S. was strongly committed to religious freedom as a human right integral to democracy and commented that the United States respected Islam and all religious faiths. The Ambassador noted that the U.S. Constitution forbids legislation on religion and that there was no U.S. government agency tasked with oversight of religious matters in the US. Orujov replied that he hoped that Azerbaijan would eventually reach the American level of domestic development that will enable the SCWRA to close.

FORMER SCWRA CHAIRMAN TO BLAME FOR CRITICISM

18. (C) Orujov told the Ambassador that he read the Azerbaijan section of the 2006 International Religious Freedom Report closely shortly after its release. He said he believed, in most respects, that the report accurately reflected Azerbaijan's record of tolerance but that some sections of the report inadequately reflected the work of the SCWRA. He opined that our criticism of GOAJ restrictions on the import/export of religious literature for example, reflected the failure of Orujov's predecessor, Rafiq Aliyev, to explain

the Azerbaijani position to Embassy officials. Orujov said that, a decade earlier when he was state counselor, he knew former U.S. Ambassador Richard Miles well which enabled fruitful cooperation between the Embassy and the GOAJ. However, Orujov said that for the past several years he had not been involved in religious affairs while Rafiq Aliyev "temporarily" held the SCWRA chairmanship. (Note: Rafiq Aliyev was the GOAJ equivalent of a 'recess appointment' having never received his formal commission from the President.)

¶9. (C) Orujov said that, under his leadership, the State Committee will reach out to the international community and the Embassy, in particular, to establish renewed cooperation and information sharing. Orujov then invited the Ambassador to deliver remarks at a GOAJ organized interfaith conference on November 16. (Comment: The Ambassador participated in the conference, delivering remarks on religious freedom and interfaith tolerance that were well-received by conference participants and by the media. End Comment.) Orujov also said that in his first four months in office, he has already reached out to the NGO community and to religious groups, noting that a week prior he had invited the leading NGOs to meet with him to discuss the state of religious freedom in Azerbaijan.

AZERBAIJAN WITHIN THE OIC

¶10. (C) The Ambassador told Orujov that the GOAJ, in its capacity as the current ministerial chair of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), was in a unique position to advance the dialogue between the West and the Muslim world. The Ambassador urged Orujov to work closely with the Foreign Ministry to follow up on Under Secretary Burns' October 2006 initiative aimed at engaging the OIC. Orujov indicated that he would follow-up with the MFA and agreed that the OIC chairmanship was an excellent vehicle for advancing Azerbaijan's role as a model in the Muslim world. The Ambassador affirmed USG support for the GOAJ's planned international interfaith tolerance conference scheduled to take place in April 2007.

DERSE